

POSITION PAPER

22 March 2021, Prague

Eurobarometer 2020 on 'Attitudes of Europeans to tobacco & electronic cigarettes' shows that harm reduction is needed

The Europe's Beating Cancer Plan published by the European Commission on 3rd February 2021 was accompanied by the Eurobarometer study on attitudes of Europeans to tobacco and electronic cigarettes. The Eurobarometer aims to present the views of European citizens on topics such as tobacco consumption and use of alternative tobacco products such as e-cigarettes. The findings of this Eurobarometer will be used by the European decision-makers to help them make informed policy decisions in the near future. Whereas the findings of the Eurobarometer clearly point out that European smokers have vastly used alternative tobacco products to effectively quit or reduce smoking, hence proving that the approach of harm reduction is effective, the European Commission completely disregards the approach and scientific evidence behind it and does not recognize the importance of it in the EU Cancer Plan.

The 2020 Eurobarometer study¹ has shown that 58% of smokers and former smokers who use, or have used, e-cigarettes said that these devices helped them to either successfully quit smoking or to reduce their tobacco consumption. This number has increased from 2017, when e-cigarettes helped 52% of smokers to stop or reduce smoking. These results indicate that a great number of smokers use alternative tobacco products to reduce tobacco consumption, and that the great majority of non-smokers is not at all attracted by e-cigarettes.

Nevertheless, when compared on a Member State basis, it can be observed that citizens in Western parts of the EU are more likely to use alternative tobacco products to stop or reduce smoking, than citizens living in the Central and Eastern European Member States. In that regard, 47% of respondents in Ireland who tried stopping or who were ex-smokers replied that they used alternative tobacco products to help them stop or reduce smoking. In France the percentage was equal to 36%, in Denmark to 35%, in Italy to 33% and in Sweden to 31%. On the other hand, in Slovenia only 11% of respondents replied that they decided to use alternative

¹ European Commission, 'Eurobarometer 506 on Attitudes of Europeans towards tobacco and electronic cigarettes' (Eurobarometer, 3 February 2021)

<<https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2240>>

tobacco products to stop or reduce smoking. In Romania and Slovakia, the percentage was 16%, in Poland 21%, and in Czech Republic 27%.

This shows that the acceptance of harm reduction policy in Western EU Member States is still much higher than in some Central-Eastern EU Member States. In that regard, recognition of harm reduction policy on the European level as an effective way of reducing tobacco consumption and addiction is the necessary step which has to be taken in order to ensure that citizens all over the EU are given equal opportunities to improve their health, and to prevent potential cancer cases, in line with the objectives of the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. In order to achieve that, decision-makers in Western EU Member States should use all the tools available to even further elevate the importance and the role harm reduction policy plays in the achievement of public health objectives. On the other hand, decision-makers in Central and Eastern parts of the EU should engage in constructive and scientific-based discussions on the benefits of harm reduction policy. This will enable them to better understand the policy and how it could support millions of citizens wishing to quit or reduce smoking.

The findings of the Eurobarometer confirm the strong and wide body of scientific evidence which proves that alternative tobacco products such as e-cigarettes are less harmful than normal cigarettes, and that the approach of harm reduction helps smokers quit or reduce their use of tobacco products. This has been echoed by the *Royal College of Physicians of London (RCP)* in its *April 2016 report* and more recently by *McNeil et al. (2018)* in a report to *Public Health England*.² The Royal College of Physicians stated that: "*Although it is not possible to precisely quantify the long-term health risks associated with e-cigarettes, the available data suggest that they are unlikely to exceed 5% of those associated with smoked tobacco products, and may well be substantially lower than this figure*". Furthermore, studies by *Lucchiari (2020)*³ and *Glasser (2020)*⁴ demonstrated that more frequent and stable use of electronic cigarettes can help smokers to quit smoking. Electronic cigarettes are also recommended as a way to quit smoking by the UK National Health Services website titled '*using e-cigarettes to stop smoking*' which says that "*Many thousands of people in the UK have already stopped smoking with the help of an e-cigarette. There's growing evidence that they can be effective.*"⁵ More scientific findings which

² Ann Mcneill and others, 'Evidence review of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products 2018: executive summary' (E-cigarettes and heated tobacco products: evidence review, 2 March 2018) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-evidence-review/evidence-review-of-e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-2018-executive-summary>>

³ Claudio Lucchiari and others, 'Benefits of e-cigarettes in smoking reduction and in pulmonary health among chronic smokers undergoing a lung cancer screening program at 6 months' [April 2020] 103(106222) Elsevier

⁴ Glasser A, 'Patterns of e-cigarette use and subsequent cigarette smoking cessation over two years (2013/2014 to 2015/2016) in the Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health (PATH) Study' [September 2020] Prime PubMed <[https://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/citation/32939555/Patterns_of_e-cigarette_use_and_subsequent_cigarette_smoking_cessation_over_two_years_\(2013/2014_to_2015/2016\)_in_the_Population_Assessment_of_Tobacco_and_Health_\(PATH\)_Study](https://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/citation/32939555/Patterns_of_e-cigarette_use_and_subsequent_cigarette_smoking_cessation_over_two_years_(2013/2014_to_2015/2016)_in_the_Population_Assessment_of_Tobacco_and_Health_(PATH)_Study)>

⁵ NHS, 'Using e-cigarettes to stop smoking' (Quit smoking, 29 March 2019) <<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/using-e-cigarettes-to-stop-smoking/>>

further supports above statements have been produced by Polosa (2018)⁶, McNeill et al (2018)⁷, and Joanna Astrid Mille et al (2016)⁸.

In the context of the findings of the Eurobarometer study and the existing body of scientific evidence, it is surprising to see that the European Commission has taken a diverging stand on the issue of harm reduction. As such, the voices of European citizens who have quit or reduced smoking with the use of alternative tobacco products, as well as the scientific evidence, have been all together disregarded by the European Commission in its Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.⁹ Instead, the European Commission proposed to introduce even stricter rules on alternative tobacco products such as e-cigarettes, hence practically depriving millions of European citizens addicted to tobacco with a possibility to quit or reduce smoking. Such an approach of European decision-makers substantially reduces the chances of achieving the objectives of the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, especially when it comes to citizens in Central and Eastern European Member States who, according to the Eurobarometer, have appeared to be the least likely to have stopped smoking.

IRAP strongly believes that alternative tobacco products and harm reduction policies are a significant benefit in the fight to reduce deaths, and to prevent the 40% of cancer cases as stated in the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. IRAP hopes that European decision-makers will be guided by science when making future political decisions which will have an impact on the lives of European citizens.

Nevertheless, the scope of harm reduction must not only cover tobacco. The scope of the harm reduction policy must also include other substance-related (illicit and licit drugs), as well as gambling, which often receives no attention, and alcohol. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and their World Drug Report from 2020, around 269 million people used drugs worldwide in 2018, and over 35 million people suffer from drug use disorders. At the same time, alcohol killed over 3 million people worldwide in 2018, and it is responsible for every 20th death. Notwithstanding the kind of addiction, all addictive behaviors have the same roots and principles, and they should be treated in a complex manner. The tools on how to moderate the negative impact of the addiction is harm reduction: a holistic and complex approach that is cost-effective, evidence-based and has a positive impact on the health of the individual and the community as a whole.

⁶ Riccardo Polosa and others, 'Health effects in COPD smokers who switch to electronic cigarettes: a retrospective-prospective 3-year follow-up' [August 2018] *International Journal of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease* 2533-2542

⁷ Ann McNeill and others, 'Evidence review of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products 2018: executive summary' (E-cigarettes and heated tobacco products: evidence review, 2 March 2018) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-evidence-review/evidence-review-of-e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-2018-executive-summary>>

⁸ Joanna Astrid Miler and others, 'Changes in the Frequency of Airway Infections in Smokers Who Switched To Vaping: Results of an Online Survey' [2016] 7(4) *Art No: 290* <https://doi.org/10.4172/2155-61051000290>) Faculty of Social Sciences Journal Articles, University of Stirling

⁹ Communication for the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan [3 February 2021] <https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/non_communicable_diseases/docs/eu_cancer_plan_en.pdf>

IRAP appeals to the European Commission to carefully consider the scientific evidence available, and to make an informed decision on the role of harm reduction policy in the implementation of the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. At the same time, IRAP hopes that the Members of the European Parliament in the EP's Special Committee on Beating Cancer (BECA) will take into account the results of the Eurobarometer, and the available scientific findings, and that they will include the concept of harm reduction in its Report on the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.

About IRAP

Institute for Rational Addiction Policies (IRAP) is a think-tank based in Prague, Czech Republic, which is a multi-disciplinary association of independent and reputable experts that studies the question of addiction from all sides including public and individual health, legislation and other legal effects, security matters, economics and market modelling, tax issues, effects on the state budget, education and prevention, social, sociological, and political questions. More information on IRAP can be found [here](#).